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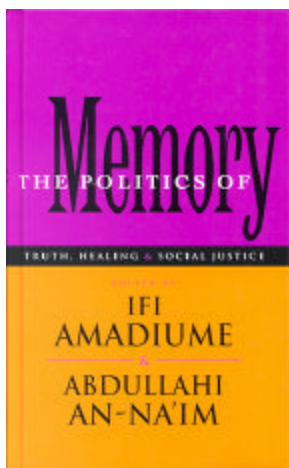


Reshaping the Present and Constructing the Future through Remembering the Past

By Mercedes Barros

A review of When History is a Nightmare: Lives and Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina by Stevan Weine. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999. 259 pp.

and



The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice by Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im. New York: Zed Books, 2000. 207 pp.

Reconstructing post-conflict societies

During the twentieth century, numerous societies witnessed and experienced massive killings, disappearances, torture, and tremendous suffering. Extreme internal conflicts resulting from ethnic, economic or political factors, and the presence of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have been the origin of much of this torment and violence. As a result of these experiences, societies have found themselves shattered and compelled to recover and rebuild their lost “unity.” In this sense, achieving such harmony again, reconstructing a democratic present and future, and dealing with the legacies of the past without prolonging the conflicts and divisions have become some of the urgent challenges these societies need to confront.

These post-conflict situations and the difficulties that they entail have become the focus of attention of different academic disciplinary perspectives such as history, law, sociology, literature, and anthropology, among others. As a result, we find a wide variety of writings on these issues with very divergent aims and objectives. This essay concentrates on two books, Stevan Weine’s When History is a Nightmare: Lives and Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina, written from a biographical perspective and based on survivors’ testimonies; and Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na’im’s The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice, an edited collection of essays written from an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on conflict situations in

different regions and countries. This essay will first present a general account of each of the two books under review, then will go on to evaluate how these writings approach the roles that justice, truth and memory play in facilitating healing and reconciliation in societies that have experienced deep conflicts and wars.

When History is a Nightmare. Lives and Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia Herzegovina. provides a new critical understanding of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Its author, Stevan Weine, is an American psychiatrist who has been working for the last seven years on a testimonial project with Bosnians survivors and witnesses of ethnic cleansing. On the basis of this experience, he arrives at the conclusion that to properly understand how the genocide could occur in Bosnia, we need to draw our attention to the process through which Bosnians have dealt with their historical memories. In this sense, through a close and detailed study of the stories Bosnian survivors tell about themselves and their country, Weine explores and manages to capture the “living deposit” that collective memory represents, successfully making visible the significant role those memories have played in shaping the life and experiences of Bosnians as individuals as well as collectively. In so doing, this original approach enriches the reader by providing him with a direct access to the voices, words and meanings of survivors, and in this way, with a wider understanding of the traumatic experience of ethnic cleansing as well as the difficult task of its remembrance.

The book is divided into three parts: *surviving*, *promoting* and *remembering* ethnic cleansing. In the first part of the book, Weine explains how the Bosnian historical experience has been caught in the struggle between two historical realities: ethnic atrocities and multi-ethnic communality. He observes how Bosnian survivors have attempted to accommodate the memories of ethnic killings, which can be traced to World War II and before, with the memories of the experience of living together as one political community under Tito’s regime. According to Weine, it is precisely within the collective memory associated with the multi-ethnic society during Tito’s era where we should look for a further understanding of what made ethnic cleansing possible. The public silence imposed by Tito’s regime over the historical memories of the war and over the dangers of ethnic nationalism became, as Weine puts it, “the space that would give birth to the nightmare of nationalism that erupted after Tito’s death and the decline of the socialist system of Yugoslavia” (p. 31).

In the second part of the book, the author examines Serbian ethnic nationalism, placing special attention on cultural elites and their use and manipulation of collective memories of traumatization to promote ethnic cleansing. Weine critically examines the role played by psychiatrists, such as Radovan Karadzic and Jovan Raskovic as well as the Belgrade group in the endorsement of the Serbian nationalistic project and its ethnic cleansing. In the third part, Weine proceeds to analyze the challenges the Bosnian community faces today. He looks at the different efforts that have been made by health professionals, artists, political activists and ordinary citizens in order to confront the memories of the ethnic cleansing and to reconstruct a peaceful and democratic future for Bosnians and their community.

An emphasis on the need for confronting the memories of the past is a dominant theme in The Politics of Memory: Truth, Healing and Social Justice. This book is an edited collection of essays mainly on Africa (with a few chapters on Latin America and Europe), which sets out to engage in a critical fashion the issues of truth, memory, social justice, healing and reconciliation. This selection

of writings offers a clear view of the specificity of each historical experience. It considers the different ways in which these communities have dealt with the atrocities of the past and brings to light the common failures and problems still needing to be resolved. In addition, this inter-regional and thematic approach explains how looking at the past sheds light on the necessary steps for rebuilding a broken community and for maintaining its unity in the future.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, organized around four themes. The first three chapters deal with the question of social justice. Wole Soyinka, Ifi Amadiume and Akachi Ezeigbo, writing on African experiences, provide a series of impassioned arguments for the need to establish local mechanisms for realizing social justice within post-conflict societies. Through the examination of the case of Biafra in Nigeria and the genocide in Rwanda, as well as through the general review of slavery in the African region during the colonial period, these authors make visible the significance of social justice—conceived mainly as reparation and restitution—in the process of healing and reconciliation.

The following three chapters consider the nature, context and consequences of the conflicts that generate the violence and atrocities within communities. Abdullahi An-Na'im, and Svetlana Peshkova examine the role of social movements in situations of severe conflict through a comparative analysis of the cases of Rwanda and Sudan. As they argue, "social movements can be the agents of the generation and intensification of conflict and injustice, as well as of sustainable conflict mediation" (p. 68). Thus, according to them, the promotion of strategies for achieving social justice and reconciliation requires a further understanding of the origin of conflicts as well as an analysis of the role social movements play within them. Focusing less on the origins of conflict and more on what happened during the periods of war, Axel Harneit-Sievers and Sydney Emezue explore the experiences of people affected by the Nigerian civil/Biafran war, as well as their perception and remembrance of such traumatic events. They point out the failure of the literature on war in Africa to address the important role that individual and collective agency have played in times of war and post-war situations. They argue that in order to understand the needs and preconditions for post-war reconstruction, it is important to identify the popular perceptions of the war, the patterns of behaviour during and after the war, as well as the individual experiences and the strategies created to cope with the memories of the war.

In chapters seven, eight and nine, Juan Mendez, Julie Mertus, Binaifer Nowrojee and Regan Ralph look at the promotion of reconciliation in the context of legal accountability. In considering the experiences of Latin American countries, Juan Mendez offers a clear argument in favour of judicial accountability. According to him, criminal trials should not be seen as impediments to reconciliation or as prolongation of factionalism and conflict, but rather as necessary mechanisms for achieving national reconciliation. As he suggests, settling old scores, providing survivors the right to justice and truth, and the removal of the stigma attached to individuals that are seen as culpable although they may be not, domestic or international trials may contribute to the process of healing and forgiveness within broken communities.

In the last chapter Mahmood Mamdani reflects particularly on the work, achievements and failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and more broadly on the role of truth within post-conflict situations. Concluding the book, Francis Deng emphasizes the need to

reconsider and re-contextualize the sources of conflict in Africa. According to him, local powers must assume responsibility for domestic conflicts and design special policies that might be able to harmonize the relations among various groups, as well as create “normative frameworks” among the African countries in order to work together in the promotion of peace and security in the continent. As he concludes, there is in Africa a need for solutions from within, a need that Africans have to fulfill by looking inside their culture and communities. In his words:

By digging into the truth, we will reveal the different perspectives that need to be reconciled or harmonised. By so doing I believe we will have a better understanding of how best to pursue the overriding goal of human dignity, defined as the broadest shaping and sharing of all values, material, moral and spiritual (p. 200).

Toward reconciliation: beyond a narrow conception of justice and the importance of the role of truth and memory

A dominant reaction to gross human rights abuses during the twentieth century has been the claim for “justice.” This response has conceived justice mainly as criminal prosecution and punishment of those who have committed such crimes. There has been an important agreement among academics, human rights activists and survivors on the benefits that justice can bring to the process of dealing with the past. As Mendez shows, judicial accountability must be considered as a precondition for achieving healing and reconciliation within post-conflict societies. Mertus also emphasizes the different functions domestic or international trials can fulfill and shows how these functions of naming crimes, blaming individual perpetrators, punishing the guilty, deterring potential perpetrators, and recording what happened, may help the survivors in the healing of their wounds and in the disclosure of the truth.

However, as Mertus also points out, although the justice of the tribunals is necessary, it might be insufficient for fully addressing the needs and concerns of survivors and, in the long term, for promoting the rebuilding of communities divided by deep conflicts and wars. Some recent experiences, such as the trials in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia conducted by international tribunals, clearly illustrate the limited functions of the tribunals. These experiences generally show how few cases are put on trial, resulting in few instances of punishment and in the frustration of many survivors still waiting for retribution. These examples also demonstrate how many horrible experiences that do not constitute crimes under domestic or international law would remain unpunished if the judicial option were not accompanied by other mechanisms and strategies. As Mertus clearly puts it, “[t] here is no crime of destruction of souls, deprivation of childhood, erasure of dreams” (p.150). In all these cases, it is clear how the tribunals fall short of providing a full public account of what happened, in the sense that the stories and memories of many survivors have no room within the tribunals’ version of the past. Thus, in order to promote healing and reconciliation more than judicial accountability is needed. Additional strategies must be created, including new strategies that take into account the needs, truths and concerns of all the survivors.

This concern for alternative mechanisms is particularly important in The Politics of Memory. It could be said that most of the contributors of this book agree with Mertus’s position and hold a wider understanding of the question of justice. For them, justice goes beyond the narrow space of the court. As Mamdani and Soyinka suggest, there are other forms of justice that must be considered

in order to promote national reconciliation and unity within broken societies. In this sense, they draw their attention to the notion of “social justice”, taking social justice mainly to mean “reparation” of the injustices and atrocities of the past. It follows from their argument that this concept of reparation implies much more than monetary recompense; it involves the claim for the redistribution of socio-economic resources, for the full acknowledgment of the crimes, for the public recognition of the suffering of the victims and survivors and the recovery of their dignity, as well as for the guarantee of the non- repetition in our own time. In addition, this argument is tied to the demand—found throughout the two books—for the contemplation of local values, concerns and needs of the survivors. As Weine makes clear, the paths that might bring certain harmony to shattered societies are those which give place to the voices of survivors and witnesses of extreme conflict and war. In this sense, realizing social justice is not a matter that can be established in abstract terms. It needs to be placed in context, considering every experience and taking into account which options and strategies for promoting healing and reconciliation could be possible in different situations.

Thus, within these writings justice acquires a broader meaning. It is understood not only as prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators of human rights abuses, but also as reparation, acknowledgement, restitution and prevention of such atrocities in the future. This new sense given to justice locates the role of memory and the work of the truth-telling process at the very centre of the discussion.

While some have argued that the attainment of truth and remembrance of the past may become “obstacles” to the achievement of healing and reconciliation, these texts emphasize the essential role both dimensions play in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. In this respect, Weine shows how at the personal level, survivors of ethnic cleansing manage to reduce or modify their individual suffering through recounting the memory of their experiences of suffering. As Weine puts it, “the testimony can give the individual survivor a voice that is empowering in and of itself” (p. 165). That is to say, the act of narrativization allows survivors to express their traumatic memories and to release the emotions they are likely to deeply repress. As one of the survivors’ testimonies in Weine’s book shows: “...I feel better. Better and better every day. Since I have been telling you my history, I am much more social. Before I avoided people, but now I like to be with people and to talk with them...” (p. 150)

This argument for remembering and truth telling presupposes the creation of a shared public space in which different voices could be heard, in which survivors could narrate their stories and recover, along with the victims, their human dignity. In so doing, survivors could attain public recognition and acknowledgment of the injustices and crimes committed in the past. As most of the writings under review make clear, such acknowledgement will open the door to the possibility of justice, healing and reconciliation within shuttered societies.

The process of remembering also supposes a dialogue about different experiences, memories and accounts of the past, providing a basis, as Weine suggests, for the construction of a “collective narrative of historical memory” (p. 166). Precisely through negotiation of collective memory among different voices can the present be reshaped and the future constructed. In this respect, the work of memory will be capable of promoting peace and democracy in post-conflict societies, and at the same time, of preventing a new wave of violence within them (see Norval 1998).

The role of memory in reworking the past and present and also in preventing atrocities in the future is strongly emphasized in these texts. Most of the authors agree that remembering and discussing the past can enable societies to prevent the repetition and renewal of violence. As Weiner shows, during Tito's era the policy of "Brotherhood and Unity" imposed by the government silenced the memories of ethnic cleansing of World War II and erased the possibility of any dialogue on ethnic nationalism. This silence foreclosed the development of a collective memory that could have preserved and more effectively conveyed the historical memories of the war, and might have provided the Bosnians some resistance to ethnic nationalism. Regarding the case of Biafra, Ifi Amadiume explains how the silence of the government on the problem of Biafra, and the denial of ordinary civilians' chance to express their suffering and anger as well as their need for reparation, have impeded the end of the internal conflict in Nigeria. As she puts it: "Twenty years after the end of the war, the hunger for vengeance and the need for criticism and admonition are still very strong" (p. 49).

Breaking the silence about the past appears within all these writings as a necessary step towards the construction of a peaceful and democratic future. The possibility of remembering the atrocities and wrongs of the past will bring relief to many survivors, offering them the necessary acknowledgment and the opportunity for reparation. At the same time, it will alert the present and future generations of the dangers they need to deal with in order to preserve the precarious unity of their society.

Even when it is not possible to reach final answers to the challenges post-conflict societies confront, as every experience needs to be put in context, these works seem to agree that remembering the past, the promotion of survivors' and witnesses' recounting of their experiences, as well as taking into account different forms of justice, are crucial avenues for opening up the possibility of achieving healing and reconciliation. Thus, this essay can end by assuming that truth, memory and justice are not "obstacles" to reconciliation, but on the contrary, they stand at its service.

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